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ALSO FOR POLAD  
DEPT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/20/2028  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: EMERGING STUDENT LEADERS OUTLINE FUTURE STRATEGIES

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. USAID Officer met February 9 with a dozen up-and-coming student leaders from western Venezuela. The students, primarily from the Law School Students' Association (Fedeve), were in the university town of Merida to prepare strategies for upcoming student elections. They were also planning a convention on human rights and developing a strategy to ensure national cohesion of their movement. Several of the students expressed interest in receiving USG assistance for organizing and educational purposes. The Officer stated while all Embassy programs are directed at strengthening civil society and encouraging participation in the democratic process, not partisan politics, perceived proximity to the Embassy may lead to BRV harassment. End Summary.

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Emerging Leaders  
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12. (C) USAID's acting country representative traveled to Merida February 9 at the invitation of Carlos Ponce and Carlos Tinoco (protect), both established USAID and POL contacts with ties to student leaders. Tinoco, who owns property outside Merida, arranged for approximately a dozen students to use his vacation home as a meeting place. Student participants included Lawrence Castro from the University of the Andes in Merida and current president of Fedeve; Lestor Toledo from the University of Zulia and former president of Fedeve; Dorian Gonzalez of the University of the Andes in Merida and president of its student union; Ziamar Castillo, president of the Law School Student Union at the Catholic University, Bolivar state; among others. The students have extensive leadership experience and appeared committed to their movement.

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Upcoming Elections  
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13. (C) Participants in the meeting primarily focused on upcoming university student elections, the first of which will be held March 5 in Merida. Student elections in Zulia state are reportedly scheduled for March or April, although there are rumors pro-Chavez student movements may seek to postpone them in hopes of garnering additional support. Student elections are particularly important in Venezuela because elected student leaders are allowed to vote on a wide array of administrative issues, including faculty staffing and funding priorities. Non-Chavista student groups won previous elections in Merida and Zulia states and are

expected to perform well in the upcoming contests.

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Convention in Maracaibo  
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¶4. (C) The students plan to hold a national convention entitled "Students and Legal Professionals" in Maracaibo, Venezuela's second largest city, March 6-8. They have invited 10 Venezuelan legal experts, professors, and former government ministers to participate, including Milos Alcalay, Venezuela's former Ambassador to the United Nations. They requested assistance to organize the conference, including airfare for some participants. USAID and the Embassy have approved this request.

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The Quest for Elusive Unity  
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¶5. (C) The students indicated they are part of a movement that has played an important role in recent Venezuelan politics. That said, they intend to focus on democracy and human rights issues, while distancing themselves from issues that tend to be divisive. However, they are also aware that some students will attempt to use the student movement as a springboard to run for public office, such as the mayoral and gubernational election in November and parliamentary elections in 2010. Many expressed concern that such ambitions might negatively affect the overall movement.

¶6. (C) For instance, Tinoco and Ponce asserted that Yon Goicochea, a prominent student leader from Caracas, plans to start his own political movement and "ride the wave" of his new-found popularity. The traditional opposition parties that attempted to co-opt Goicochea now feel burned by his political aspirations and are attempting to undermine his credibility. One apparently false rumor making the rounds within the Un Nuevo Tiempo's youth wing is that Goicochea accepted a first-class airline ticket to Maracaibo at the invitation of its pro-Chavez mayor, which has put him at odds with opposition leader and Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales. (Note: Goicochea told Emboffs in January that he does not intend to run in upcoming state and local elections, but would like to run for a National Assembly seat in 2010. End Note).

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Request for Assistance  
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¶7. (S) The students understood that they were meeting with an officer from the Embassy's assistance team. They were appreciative of the Embassy's discreet assistance in 2007. They expressed interest in increased cooperation, and even asked if they could display the USAID logo on donated material, thinking it might attract additional funding from other donors. USAID Officer focused on the fact that all Embassy activities are designed to strengthen civil society and increase democratic participation with no partisan designs, while also noting that actions such as putting the USAID logo on materials might lead to BRV harassment.

¶8. (S) The students requested various types of assistance, ranging from support for the Maracaibo conference to strategic planning and advice from other student movements, particularly from Eastern Europe. They expressed interest in serving as electoral observers and witnesses during the November elections. They also discussed launching democracy promotion seminars in the poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of Caracas, Chavez's traditional base of support, and in starting a radio program on democracy and human rights. USAID/OTI is reviewing these suggestions and will look for opportunities to work with the students as appropriate.

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Comment  
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19. (C) While many of these students are not as well-known as those who participated in the pro-RCTV demonstrations or the campaign against Chavez's proposed changes to the constitution, they represent an important group of emerging grassroots leaders. They did not appear, at least yet, to be self aggrandizing, but instead focused on issues of democracy. At the same time, their criticism of some of the most prominent student leaders reflects the internal divisions within the ideologically diverse student movement. Many recognize the student movement's ability to influence the Venezuelan public, but do not know how to harness that power most effectively. The Embassy is reviewing their requests for assistance.

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